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## Experience and Meaning in Qualitative Research: A Conceptual Review and a Methodological Device Proposal

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### Key words:

experience;  
meaning;  
phenomenology;  
hermeneutics;  
methodological  
device

**Abstract:** The relevance of *experience* and *meaning* in qualitative research is mostly accepted and is common ground for qualitative studies. However, there is an increasing trend towards trivializing the use of these notions. As a consequence, a mechanistic use of these terms has emerged within qualitative analysis, which has resulted in the loss of the original richness derived from the theoretical roots of these concepts. In this article, we aim to recover these origins by reviewing theoretical postulates from phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions and to propose their convergence in a holistic perspective. The challenge is to find the local source of meanings that will enlighten on how to understand people's experiences. This discussion is the basis for the encounter context themes (ECT) methodological device, which emphasizes the importance of studying experience and meaning as part of a larger whole: the participants' life-world. Hence, ECT seeks to complement the available methodological tools for qualitatively-oriented studies, recovering—rather than re-creating—a theoretical discussion useful for current qualitative research practices.

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## 1. Introduction

Nowadays, qualitative research is a major branch of inquiry in the social sciences, encompassing a wide range of phenomena. Qualitative studies share a naturalistic and situated concern as the basis of their inquiry: they seek to study phenomena through a person's perspective, paying attention to the context where they emerge (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2005). Considering this aim, *experience* and *meaning* appear as crucial concepts for reaching a deeper understanding of a participant's perspective, thus improving the qualitative comprehension of the social and psychological phenomena studied. Despite the relevance of these concepts—for methodological design, data production strategy, information analysis, and results presentation (FLICK, 2012)—, it is rather unusual to find any critical reviews on what these concepts mean for qualitative researchers. This, regrettably, reflects the scholarly neglect of the study of what is involved in capturing human phenomena through the experiences and meanings of participants. [1]

This lack of critical attention ultimately downplays the use of experience and meaning and their methodological consequences. Such downplaying is not harmless for the practices of qualitative researchers, since a mechanistic use of methodology—i.e., to replicate a methodological technique without a careful analysis of its pertinence to the studied phenomena (HANNES & MACAITIS, 2012)—is likely to occur when these notions are taken for granted. By doing so, the researcher blindly trusts previous studies, uncritically importing the way in which previous authors defined their object of study. The qualitative scholar, therefore, fails to explicitly discuss what participants' experience is, how their meaning is built, what their mutual implications are, and how both are related to the nature of the phenomenon studied. [2]

An example of this downplaying is the so-called *segmentation process*, or *data decomposition process*, as proposed by structural analysis (PIRET, NIZET & BOURGEOIS, 1996), grounded theory methodology (GLASER & STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS & CORBIN, 2015 [1990]), or consensual qualitative research (HILL, THOMPSON & NUTT, 1997). The output of such de-compositional processes is a new data structure that simplifies the description of the phenomena—according to the researchers' perspective. Although these well-defined analysis procedures are certainly necessary for qualitative research, they usually lack warnings about the consequences of using them in an excessively rigid way. In grounded theory methodology, for instance, the only caveats issued relate to the exclusive use of verbal content; while in structural analysis it is barely mentioned that the creation of a hierarchically-ordered network might result in ignoring information that does not fit into the researcher-made hierarchy. In brief, the risk of imposing the code or analytical structure over the original participants' experience or meaning is often neglected. Moreover, not only research methods could be simplified and used in a rigid way, but also the creation of theories in social sciences could follow a similar top-down approach—rather than a dialogical and emergent mode. [3]

Another widespread practice in qualitative research consists in tying up the data analysis process to restricted categories previously established by the researcher. This technique introduces a major gap between participants' experiences—as they were narrated—and the results obtained. Such categorizations, furthermore, also involve an *over-interpretative process* whereby the meanings constructed by researchers constrain the way in which participants experience the phenomenon. Hence, the segmentation process and its over-interpretative nature distance qualitative studies from their participants, and consequently from the phenomenon itself. As Alfred SCHÜTZ (1967 [1932]) forewarned:

"(...) the social sciences start out from, and take for granted, the same social world in which we live from day to day, yet their methods of gathering knowledge are quite different from those of everyday life. For the social scientist organizes and classifies his [or her] data into quite different contexts of meaning and works them up in quite different ways" (p.220). [4]

Recovering the actual experiences and meanings of participants—just as they expressed them—as the main object of study in qualitative research would avoid the over-simplification issues related to the segmentation processes described above. In order to put into practice such a recovery, the present article proposes a methodological device that focuses on participants' experiences and meanings in a holistic way, striving to preserve their original sense. This device is aimed at compiling and presenting an ordered and explicit set of general suggestions and stages of analysis to complement traditional qualitative methodologies. Rather than proposing a whole new methodology, in the present article we define a set of practices that seek to avoid losing track of the individuals within a complex data structure—individuals who are the original source of the entire data analysis. In our proposed view, recovering the focus on participants' experiences and meanings in a holistic manner, would place qualitative research back on its original tracks, i.e., striving to creating descriptive, tailor-made studies on particular human phenomena. [5]

Here it is worth mentioning a number of factors that have moved social sciences away from the latter. First, because analytical research is usually considered as more useful since it offers simpler guidance in the design process (CORRELL, ALEXANDER, ALBERS, SARIKAYA & GLEICHER, 2014). Second, due to the difficulty of claiming that a small sample size—more typical in holistic studies—describes generalizable facts in the way that positivistic tradition has determined (ibid.). And third, in cases where the results are effectively developed in a holistic way, this are dismantled and published separately in different journals, because the publication of longer texts (over 10,000 words) is more difficult in the mainstream research outlets (MORSE & CHUNG, 2003). In this sense, qualitative researchers are narrowing the horizons of their research and restricting their holistic possibilities (ibid.) mostly due to disciplinary and institutional constraints rather than phenomenon-related elements. Finally, although the notion of holism is not new in social sciences, usually it turns into an implicit axiom, wrongly

defined or not clear what it means to empirical research, and without methodological elaboration and support (VERSCHUREN, 2001). [6]

In sum, this article is an invitation to advance the general comprehension of social and psychological phenomena, expanding the horizons of qualitative research rather than focusing on a particular technique. In order to achieve the former, this article is organized as follows: in Section 2 we present a brief review of how the notions of experience and meaning have been addressed by hermeneutic, phenomenological, and holistic traditions. Following this, in Section 3 the proposed methodological device, its phases, and its application are introduced. The article ends by discussing its scope and limitations in Section 4. [7]

## **2. Experience and Meaning as Foci of Qualitative Analysis**

Taken as a whole, qualitative research ought to focus on describing participants' perspectives or views. Therefore, a qualitatively-oriented methodological device should, first and foremost, make the apprehension of those perspectives easier. Metaphorically speaking, these views should be the 'compass' of any qualitative research; since they are the most solid basis for scholars to ground conclusions about how people experienced the phenomena studied (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2005). As described above, participants' perspectives are commonly thematized in terms of experiences and their meanings but leaving aside the discussion of what exactly these terms stand for. In the present article, these concepts are addressed from both phenomenological and hermeneutic standpoints. Even though previous studies have addressed the relevance of these theoretical traditions for qualitative research separately (e.g., COHEN & OMERY, 1994; MOUSTAKAS, 1994), in what follows we propose that the contributions of these traditions could—and should—converge into a holistic approach that places participants' experiences and meanings at the center of the qualitative inquiry as a integrative, recursive process. [8]

### **2.1 Hermeneutics: From experience to meaning**

In ordinary life, our experiences about the world, others, and us usually do not involve questions or doubts at first; on the contrary, many times they are taken for granted as seamless elements of the processes we call routines. It is in this sense that the everyday world where we typically dwell is an "ordinary life" (HUSSERL, 1910-1911, p.24). Yet this is not always the case as the former is not the only disposition towards the world we live in, since:

" I can at any given time change all this and bring these acts within the focus of my gaze. For instance, I may ask, 'Have I understood you correctly?' 'Don't you mean something else?'. (...) I no longer experience my fellow man in the sense of sharing his life with him; instead I 'think about him'. But now I am acting like a social scientist" (SCHÜTZ, 1967 [1932], p.140). [9]

For SCHÜTZ, it is "quite clear that the starting point of social science is to be found in ordinary social life" (p.141). The latter implies that all socially-oriented

research has to start from a description aimed at understanding the ordinary social world, yet striving to achieve *reflective thinking* about this world. Such reflection on the social world—where the evident is not taken for granted anymore—necessarily involves a process of interpretation conducted by social agents about social actions performed by other agents. To comprehensively understand how this process happens is the aim of hermeneutics, that is, understanding how we understand (GEERTZ, 2000a [1983]). In this regard, hermeneutics stresses how people construct meanings based on their already-lived, past experiences in order to understand their world, others, and themselves. This constructive, hermeneutic process plays a significant role within the social sciences, and particularly within qualitative research. [10]

DREYFUS (1991) proposes that the quest for creating formal models, as well as the development of de-contextualized theories, has not succeeded in capturing human complexity. As the traditional, analytical approach to research has been challenged, descriptive and interpretative methods have gained traction in order to capture experiences and meanings. According to this author, the approach proposed by Martin HEIDEGGER, based on *interpretation* processes, provides a fruitful alternative to the analytical standpoint. An alternative capable of describing and comprehending human beings from their own understanding, avoiding any externally and unarticulated theoretical entities. Thus HEIDEGGER invites us to return to the everyday world through people's views, giving relevance to social and cultural contexts as conditions of everyday life and common sense (DREYFUS, 1991). In the same vein, GEERTZ (2000b [1973]) argues that the enormous diversity of cultural life prevents the development of a generic perspective for addressing these social and cultural contexts. Understanding a phenomenon is thus tightly related to the element transmitted and to the cultural tradition to which it refers:

"The integration of cultural life results from a chimera by having people who live in different worlds. The first step is surely to accept the depth of the differences; the second to understand what these differences are; the third to construct some sort of vocabulary in which they can be publicly formulated" (p.161). [11]

The meaning expressed in any given moment is unique and, therefore, the method used should be able to capture it within its contingency. For Jerome BRUNER (1990), this implies considering what people do in their world and what people say about it. In other words, *doing* does not refer to behavior, but rather to culturally-located, goal-oriented *actions*. In brief, the challenge is to find the local source of meanings that will enlighten us on how to understand people. [12]

Hans-Georg GADAMER (2006 [1975]) goes beyond HEIDEGGER's proposal, linking personal-meaning-making processes to the overall phenomenon of language, which involves not only individual linguistic-verbal expressions, but also our entire encounter with the world and the intersubjective communion. GADAMER states that each *language game* (in the sense of WITTGENSTEIN, 1988 [1953]) refers to a certain way of life; therefore, as life and experience change, new linguistic forms and new meanings emerge. The construction of

meaning occurs when a common interpretation of the world emerges from the intersubjective encounter (GADAMER, 2006 [1975]). To understand—and then inquire on—the meaning of this interpretation, hermeneutics proposes the emergence of interpretations from the participants' world (*Welt*) instead of elementary processes established a priori by an external observer. The starting point is neither an artificial structure nor a theory. In fact, this perspective's main aim is to overcome obvious and crystallized viewpoints by turning visible the deep and subtle meaning of intersubjective human actions. This effort creates the methodological challenge of making visible the cultural, social, and historical conditions of how we understand ourselves and also other people. In the words of GADAMER:

"All correct interpretation must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed of *imperceptible habits* of thought, and it may direct its gaze 'on the *things themselves*' (...). For the interpreter to let himself be guided by the things themselves is obviously not matter of a single, 'conscientious' decision, but is 'the first, last, and constant task' (2006 [1975], p.269, emphases added). [13]

Such *interpretative processes* require researchers to be capable of reviewing their own biases and letting the phenomenon emerge from its particular cultural environment. An important point is that hermeneutics does not seek to neglect the meaning-making person who is interpreting (see DICKSON-SWIFT, JAMES, KIPPEN & LIAMPUTTONG, 2009): it is not a covert way to attain the desired experimental asepsis of the positivist scientist. GADAMER's early clarification is apt in this respect:

"We find that meanings cannot be understood in an arbitrary way. Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot stick blindly to our own fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another. Of course this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. (...) But this kind of sensitivity involves neither 'neutrality' with respect to content nor the extinction on one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices" (2006 [1975], p.271). [14]

Furthermore, in order to capture a particular meaning, the role of the particular person capturing it is crucial. As Alfred SCHÜTZ (1967 [1932]) pointed out, there are two separate stages in this process. First, examining experiences that occur in the stream of consciousness (see GURWITSCH, 1966; JAMES, 1950 [1890]) and inhibit the clear delimitation of an actual experience. Second, stopping to think about the actual stream and paying attention to the experience that has already occurred, which is known as "reflective thinking" (SCHÜTZ, 1967 [1932], p.65). Hence, the study of meaning does not directly refer to actual experience, but to the way the self considers its past experience. Therefore, "only the already experienced is meaningful, not that which is being experienced. For meaning is

merely an operation of intentionality, which, however, only becomes visible to the reflexive glance" (p.52). [15]

The notion of meaning used here does not refer to the purely semantic character of the term, but also to its *performative* dimension (HÖRMANN, 1981). By giving a meaning to something we do not only define it, but we also establish a personal position towards this phenomenon, a view that coincides with its field of action and its relationship with this meaning, which in this case involves the actual experience. [16]

Several ideas can be inferred from what has been stated so far. First of all, meanings are created in people's encounters with the world and in their interaction with others, which implies that they are deep-rooted in culture. Second, by being sensitive to culture, the authors agree that the diversity in which we live must be accepted and that these variations must be given serious attention—be them differences or convergences. Third, meaning construction is approached not solely in terms of an individual mental process linked to sensory experience, but as emerging within specific interactions between (at least) two persons which take place in a specific cultural context and are mediated through (and thus confined by) language. The role of language—understood as an expressive tool rather than as a purely linguistic phenomenon (CASSIRER, 1957)—is also emphasized in the creation of meanings, which are transformed and enacted in the intersubjective encounter. Meaning is strongly associated with experience insofar as it refers to a person who not only lives, but who also attributes meaning to his/her experiences, therefore giving meaning to his/her life. Hence, the study of meaning does not directly refer to concrete experiences, but to how an experience that has already occurred is lived. [17]

Considering the above, it can be concluded that any given experience has an incomparable significance when it is placed in context and when the meaningful constructions made by someone are understood. Nevertheless, following the premise that the assumptions of research must be made explicit, we may ask: what is understood by experience? Answering this question properly requires going back to the contributions made by the phenomenological tradition. [18]

## **2.2 Phenomenology: Back to experience**

The phenomenological school of thought focuses on the in-depth description and research of the person's experience when faced with objects, world situations, or him/herself (IHDE, 1986 [1977]; ZAHAVI, 2005). In brief, these postulates seek to oppose traditional empirical science, which focuses on directly studying the empirical object (TOULMIN & LEARY, 1992), presupposing that the person who observes is irrelevant in terms of what is perceived. On the contrary, Edmund HUSSERL (1910-1911) states that rather than a subject-object distinction there is an inseparable correlation between *noesis* and *noema*. Roughly said, this correlation implies a connection between the form in which something is presented in the world and the position where the person is when he/she experiences such a phenomenon (IDHE, 1986 [1977]). Thenceforth, several



authors have embraced the HUSSERLian postulate: in order to understand a phenomenon, whatever the purpose, it is not possible to ignore the experience of the person who lives the phenomenon (ZAHAVI, 2005). [19]

Likewise, Wilhelm DILTHEY (1989 [1883]) identified experience as the necessary *and* sufficient piece of knowledge in the human sciences, inasmuch as "individuals' lived experience of being in society brings no more clarification than the experience already contains" (p.83). DILTHEY distinguishes between an inner experience, which addresses the experience of feelings and will, and an experience of the world and of others, distinction that arise after carrying out a reflexive exercise about a lived experience, however, it is important to note that both are connected and part of a continuous whole. [20]

As Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY (1973 [1958]) noted, however, to fully understand the human experience is first needed to mark the difference between immediate experience—which is lived directly—and accumulated experience—which is its subsequent objectification (BECH, 2005). This is necessary because the person not only lives in a ceaseless flow of experience, but is also capable of attributing a meaning to his/her experience and, through reflective thinking, make sense of his/her life. Recognizing that experiences, both our own and those of the world, tend to go unnoticed, further effort or attention is required to capture them in order to finally express these experiences through language (HERDER, 1959 [1774]). "It is not the passive attitude of a subject who watches himself live but rather the active effort of a subject who grasps the meaning of his experience" (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1973 [1958], p.72). [21]

On this point, MERLEAU-PONTY's (2004 [1948]) clarification is crucial to properly describe the existential character of people's experience. For him, the latter is *not* only some sort of story-telling, since it implies a person who experiences and is completely interwoven with his/her body, which in turn is space and time. Hence, the body is presented as the scope of the actual experience: "rather than a mind *and* a body, man is a mind *with* a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things" (p.56). [22]

Therefore, it can be said that the notion of experience implies an immediate experience that is reported as an accumulated one, which is associated with reflective thinking about the former. Both constitute a process that requires an intentional act or attention along with effort, conducted in the field of consciousness, and from which a meaning or sense is inferred. Hence, it is clear that experiences are varied and specific to whoever lives them. [23]

Here, the intertwinement between meaning-construction and the experiences from which this meaning emerges is evident. Moreover, this happens in a constant and coordinated flow. Given that experience develops as a constant flow, and its main characteristic is that it is taken for granted, it is when this flow is stopped and attention is directed to what has already occurred that the experience takes on a special meaning and is translated into available knowledge (DREYFUS, 1991). Nonetheless, it is relevant to note that such knowledge is not,

by any means, objective or pure. Rather, it is always dependent upon the language and the specific interaction where it was created—for a more detailed discussion see Ernesto SPINELLI (2005 [1989]). Therefore, this available knowledge cannot be uncritically assumed to reflect the participants' true meaning. [24]

The deep connection between experience and meaning prompts the question whether it is possible to separate these two elements or if, on the contrary, this separation is only a theoretical exercise carried out from a metaphysical perspective. In order to clarify the feasibility of this distinction, several holistic approaches have proposed that a number of elements be considered, always taking into account the totality in which they are embedded. The latter is equivalent to asking whether it is possible to understand the meanings built from multiple experiences as if they were completely independent from each other, without considering the whole person who lives and expresses them. [25]

### **2.3 Holism: Meaningful experience**

The question about the possibility of understanding a complex phenomenon solely based on its different parts can be called the holistic question. This question seeks to tackle a central assumption of the analytical paradigm, namely that knowing a phenomenon can occur by analyzing its parts (COLLEY & DIMENT, 2001). Regarding people's experiences and meanings, the latter would imply that, by collecting a number of them, it would be then possible to reconstruct the person who is living them. In the context of this possibility, a holistic standpoint poses several objections (BORTOFT, 1996; DIRIWÄCHTER, 2008). [26]

The first objection seeks to tackle the analytical way of approaching to the phenomenon. This approach, known as "passive awareness" (BORTOFT, 1996, p.250), involves devising an abstraction of an experience, generating a mental image that highlights what is similar over what is diverse, excluding the differences and canceling any special characteristics. This process begins by searching with a predefined objective and therefore does not consider the spontaneous appearance of phenomena. This exclusion of differences prevents phenomena from being captured in their complexity, which leads to a reductionism that does not include the richness of diversity (DIRIWÄCHTER, 2008; HÖRMANN, 1981; SHANON, 1993). In contrast, Henri BORTOFT (1996) proposes an active screening approach, understood as an attitude of careful attention towards the special characteristics of the phenomenon and openness to its novelty. In contrast, the first perspective does not analyze phenomena in depth, but instead approaches them seeking uniformity and objectification. Uniformity is achieved through the fragmentation of unity and the extreme summarization of differences. On the other hand, the second perspective assumes that phenomena are complex and inherently undetermined and dynamic, and therefore tries to describe their diversity, highlighting the intrinsic relationships between their parts. Each part of the unit is considered an expression of the whole and these parts are not necessarily homogeneous. [27]

Accordingly, GOETHE proposes a similar approach to phenomena: "seeing [them] comprehensively" (BORTOFT, 1996, p.290). The counterpoint of analytical understanding, being essentially a reductive process (WOLCOTT, 1994) and an atomistic approximation (COLLEY & DIMENT, 2001), tends to isolate the units of analysis from their context and study them in an artificially isolated situation seeking for explanations and effects on other units (VERSCHUREN, 2001)—forgetting that they belong to the context. In this way, it obscures the interrelations between the integral parts of organic systems by treating them as a mechanistic conglomerate (COLLEY & DIMENT, 2001). In contrast, GOETHE suggested (BORTOFT, 1996) that we should see comprehensively rather than selectively, that is, broadly capturing the intrinsic connections between the parts of a unit in its natural context of belongingness. This exercise is both concrete—when we pay attention to details and parts—and holistic—when we observe the whole or overall phenomenon, which implies a "twofold vision" (p.301). This act of observing makes it possible to intensively and deeply experience wholeness. [28]

Nevertheless, at this point it is important to distinguish what kinds of phenomena have been thematized so far. Are all phenomena of similar nature? Can different types of phenomena be studied in an identical manner? The holistic perspective is humble on this point: all its reflections focus on living phenomena, that is, those that are in *open-ended development*, just as any human phenomena (DIRIWÄCHTER, 2008), like experience and meaning. Thus, it is proposed that everything related to human nature is living, inconclusive, and in permanent transformation. Therefore, in order to apprehend the phenomenon in its present expression, it is necessary to move from mechanical intellect to intuition and direct experience. This turn implies a conscious involvement rather than a spectator position, which demands creating synergy and establishing a connection of mutual dependency with the phenomenon. As "the phenomenon becomes manifest in the actual act of knowing" (BORTOFT, 1996, p.272), it is important to become aware of *how* to observe rather than of *what* can be observed. [29]

In brief, assuming that experiences are closed units that can be meaningful without being interrelated is a limitation of a particular paradigm that does not understand phenomena as wholes. Since experiences and their meanings are always embodied in a specific person and interwoven in his/her life, the exercise of extracting them—as a drop of water that is extracted from a waterfall—without a synoptic view of the *whole* where they are embedded is equal to losing the phenomenon itself; instead, the result is an organization created from and for the researcher. In this regard, for Rainer DIRIWÄCHTER, "while we can abstract elements from a phenomenon, attempting to put these elements together again will not result in the original element" (2008, p.33). On the contrary, the suggestion has been made to take into account the overall phenomenon and then define its different parts based on the intrinsic connection between each part and the whole, which should allow us to obtain a synthesis of the phenomenon as it is. Hence,

"(...) any attempt to incorporate the products of elementary processes into a totality (*Ganzheit*) requires the person to leave the method of summation of properties and

acquire the process of qualitative description of the experienced phenomenon from the perspective of the totality" (p.34). [30]

Returning to the problem originally proposed in this article, we can clearly see the depth of the risk taken when mechanizing research processes and data analysis in qualitative studies; as well as doing a dogmatic application of the notions of experiences and meanings without a further discussion of these concepts. Highlighting this risk and proposing a methodological device that can be applied across different types of qualitative strategies are the aims of this review. [31]

### **3. A Methodological Device for the Qualitative Analysis of Experience and Meaning**

Considering the relevance that experience and meaning have within qualitative research, the proposed encounter context themes (ECT) methodological device aims to complement qualitative strategies of content analysis. Its main intended contribution consists in formalizing several existing methodological approaches rather than creating new ones. Thus, this methodological device seeks to remind researchers of crucial steps to avoid losing sight of the richness of experiences and meanings and of the fact that they are personally involved in the phenomena studied. In sum, the ECT tries to prevent the mechanization of data analysis and data production. [32]

For the ECT, the importance of accessing subjectivity is to learn about the uniqueness of each participant. This makes it possible to recover people's experiences—even if incomplete—and meanings as valid sources, since they are *certain* to the person who lives them. Therefore, the qualitative analysis of a person should not just involve *organizing* and *classifying* their experiences and meanings. Instead, such an analysis should focus on capturing the person's point of view. In this vein, a main analytical task prior to the definition of concepts should be to focus on *organismically* rooted events, instead of establishing isolated categories. This perspective helps to retrieve relations between different aspect of a phenomenon in a local manner, noticing connections with contextual and socio-cultural elements where it develops. [33]

Therefore, its basis for understanding human phenomena is the direct exchange of experiences and meanings between participants and researchers. This exchange requires a mutual attitude of openness, notwithstanding that all intersubjective encounters have inherent biases and prejudices which *per se* are not an obstacle to capturing the phenomena examined, as long as they are taken into account. [34]

A hermeneutic statement refers to the link between the researcher and the conditions of knowledge production, that is, what is discovered and understood is not independent from who interprets it. All this results in a double or dialogical hermeneutics (see GROEBEN & SHEELE, 2000), which focuses on a conversation between researchers and participants that validates the understanding process built through the triangulation between them.

Triangulation is understood as the process of permanent contrast and comparison during the study of a phenomenon, either by including various information sources, different views from the research team, a variety of techniques, and/or different theories and designs (CORNEJO & SALAS, 2011). It provides an overview of the research process by including a broad perspective of the phenomenon and of knowledge construction in general. In this respect, is important to consider that interviews and other narrative strategies are neither the only bearers of experiences and meaning, nor do they catch them automatically (SILVERMAN, 2013). Therefore, it is necessary to put effort into organizing and varying data production. [35]

In the ECT, researchers are expected to be aware of their preconceptions and capable of expressing their assumptions. In addition, they must leave aside theories that might deform their understanding of phenomena. This is expected to allow them to attain greater sensitivity regarding how others experience and give meaning to the phenomena and their specific characteristics. Hence, it should also prevent them from adjusting the phenomena to their a priori knowledge. [36]

Taking into account that data fragmentation is a usual stage of qualitative analysis, the methodological considerations herein proposed suggest paying attention to this aspect, in order to avoid losing track of the overall experience and its meaning. These suggestions imply incorporating into the analysis process a holistic approach to the experiences and meanings constructed by the participants. This holistic perspective is expected to allow the researcher to get closer to participants, being sensitive to their core topics, and thus recovering not just what participants verbally expressed, but also *where* and *how* they are experiencing them. Methodologically, this could facilitate the emergence of the common sense embedded in the intersection between human experience and the world (i.e., context, events, other people), expressed in the constructive encounter between researchers and participants. [37]

Three phases mark the pace of the analysis proposed by the ECT. These are not understood as sequential, recipe-like steps, but as three recursive moments taking place during the research process. The first phase is a comprehensive approach to the person and the encounter, that is, recovering the first mark left by the experience of the researcher during each data production encounter. The second phase concerns the specification and in-depth examination of the forms and contexts of key topics, thus enabling researchers to capture experiences and meanings present in the participants' stories. Finally, the third phase consists in reviewing with the actual participants the models of understanding that emerge in the process. [38]

In brief, being aware of who is talking, the person present in the encounter, and the everyday context where this person takes a position can make experiences and their meaning clearer to the researcher. Through the ECT, it is easier for a qualitative researcher to create a holistic image of how participants represent their life configuration, and how this configuration is connected to particular

research topics, by validating these topics upon the basis of participants' own experience and meaning. In the following section, all three phases are detailed. [39]

### 3.1 First phase: Reflective thinking about the encounter with another person or group

This phase highlights the singularity of each case under study, be them people or groups, in addition to reflect on the specific characteristics of the encounter and its impact on the researcher (BREUER, 2003). In the case of an individual interview, it means visualizing the other person—i.e., recovering the participant's *spirit*—and detecting the topics highlighted by the participant. In the case of a collective strategy, the unit of analysis is the group, taking into account its dynamics and unique characteristics. [40]

This phase is carried out as data production progresses and involves recording two aspects, related either to the phenomenon under study or to emerging issues. The first of them are the researcher's first impressions about the actual production strategy used. The second relates to the impressions left by the central issues that participants expressed about the activity undertaken. In this regard, it is important for all these issues to be written down in the field notebook—as it is done in ethnographic research. Hence, this phase consists in formalizing through a written record the overall intuitions of the researcher in an intersubjective encounter with the participants. Then, the recommendation is to share these impressions or intuitions with the research team, in order to adapt data production and analysis to the initial approach to the phenomenon. Table 1 describes the main aspects to be considered when taking notes about a specific case (person or group).

Purpose	Question	Type of record
To empathetically capture others based on their being in the world	Who is in front of me?	Socio-demographic description, specific biographical events, life circumstances.
To identify the attitude of the other person in the encounter	How do they present themselves?	Emotional climate of the encounter, verbal and non-verbal communication, type of collaboration and reflective thinking.
To detect the main experiences and meanings related to the phenomenon under study	What are the main topics in their story?	Topics expressed, what they are associated with, and how they are prioritized.
To identify the researcher's intuitions and reactions	What happened to me during the encounter with the other person?	Discoveries and reflective thoughts, both at a personal level and related to the topic under study.

Table 1: ECT, first phase, key questions for field notes about the encounter [41]

### 3.2 Second phase: Review of the context of the participant's story

The main goal of this phase is to complement the topics detected by applying the traditional analyses through 'thick descriptions', as proposed by GEERTZ (2000b [1973]). The aim here is to include the overarching dimensions of the participants' topics. Thus, different dimensions of observation are specified in order to go deep into the contexts of what is expressed by each participant, resulting in a more intensive analysis. Hence, during this phase, the topics highlighted by each participant are completed with details from their story, in order to facilitate their articulation with those provided by the other participants. Since material is always collected within an encounter with a researcher, the interactional and wider socio-cultural context of the interaction needs to be taken into account in the interpretation of the research data. [42]

Table 2 describes the four main dimensions to be recorded, preferably in the field notebook. It is worth noting the interactional, temporal, spatial and socio-cultural dimensions during the descriptive and relational analyses.

Dimension	Type of record
Interactional	Identify the party to whom the participant is talking when discussing different topics (persons, events, institutions, roles).
Temporal	Record the unfolding aspect of what is expressed, highlighting potential transformations and dynamics of the phenomenon, and identifying its possible directionality. Underline key events and temporary breaks in the story.
Spatial	Define the immediate context where people interact daily. Depending on the topic, it may be important to record, for example, the participants' neighborhood, the square they visit, their workplace, and their living conditions (in terms of significance rather than considering material aspects).
Socio-cultural	Describe the historical, social, and cultural aspects to which the participants implicitly or explicitly refer. For example, political and economic events associated with specific topics in their life.

Table 2: ECT, second phase, main dimensions for field notes about the context [43]

### 3.3 Third phase: Checking the relations between thematic fields

In qualitative analysis—even in the case of descriptive studies—the connections between the different elements composing a phenomenon should be defined with a comprehensive articulation of the various topics in question. Establishing these connections—or articulations—becomes imperative in the case of relational studies; for example, in selective and axial coding in grounded theory methodology (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 2015 [1990]), or in the actantial phase in structural analysis (MARTINIC, 2002). Thus, the articulations made by researchers have to be constantly checked by the participants, in order to ensure

its pertinence and consistency with their experiences and meanings during data production. Hence, the participants have a role that goes beyond being a mere passive source of information: they are relevant actors in data analysis in building a *mutual understanding* (GURWITSCH, 1979). Out-of-place articulations have to be discarded yet without dismissing the entire field of significance, since the possibility for a phenomenon to be constitutively ambiguous remains open. [44]

In practice, this requires constantly checking with the participants the relations between thematic fields, both in data production and in subsequent encounters. With this purpose in mind, it is important to always leave open the possibility of a future encounter with the participants in order to examine their story in more depth. At the same time, it is advisable to invite other researchers to provide feedback on this process. Therefore, by including participants, researchers, and other colleagues, a multiple viewpoint can be built, which will make the analysis process richer. [45]

Table 3 describes the main triangulation strategies used to ensure the quality and the contextual nature of the main themes reported by participants and also to prevent the risk of over-interpretation by the researchers.

Strategies	Directions
Triangulation with participants	Shift the analysis to the participants' particular context, sharing partial results or progress with them, and implement data production strategies during the last stage of research in order to check the relations between thematic fields.
Triangulation with other researchers	Open alternative interpretations and regulate possible over-interpretations by discussing the analysis with the research team and including external researchers to promote the emergence of new interpretations and consensus.
Triangulation with the initial research questions	Critically review the initial research questions and start a dialogue with them upon the basis of the current understanding of the phenomenon.

Table 3: ECT, third phase, main strategies for checking the relations between thematic fields [46]

### 3.4 Application of the ECT methodological device

Grasping experiences and meanings in a holistic way implies not only talking to people. It also implies looking at their environments and identifying contextual links with their life-world, as well as recording researcher's own reflections and engaging in permanent dialogue within the research team about data production and analysis. In this way, the first phase is mainly focused on the researcher's own experiences and meanings about the encounter with the participants during data production. The second phase also implies a reflection by the researcher, extended to the research team as well, about contextual links but also about recovering the main issues that participants expressed—even if they are



not fully related to the phenomenon under study. The third phase involves a direct interaction between participant and researchers after performing some data production and analysis to check with the former the interpretations generated and adjust them to what people's actual experiences and meanings were, complemented with a dialogue within the research team about the main topics that emerged and the initial research questions. This is exemplified in Table 4 through the case of a study about poverty in rural areas.

<b>First phase: Encounter</b>	<b>Type of record</b>
Who is in front of me?	The participant is a woman in her thirties, living in poverty, in a rural, overcrowded home with her daughter and her partner's family. She participates in a rural development program that supports productive activities, in her case related to traditional weaving.
How do they present themselves?	The participant is a kind person, willing to collaborate with the study. At the beginning she presents herself as a very shy person, watched closely by her couple, but when she asked him to leave the room she expressed herself more comfortably.
What are the main topics in their story?	The participant discussed her life, her daily duties, the benefits and obstacles of living in the countryside, some family issues (notably, her partner's initial reluctance to allow her to leave the house and go to town or participate in the program's activities), and her experience in the development program as a way to expand her social network. The latter aspects were highlighted by the participant.
What happened to me during the encounter with the other person?	At the beginning, I felt uncomfortable talking to the participant with her couple's surveillance; although he did not say a word, he imposed a sort of restriction. After he left the room, the conversation was more fluent and she shared deep issues with me. This made me think about the influence of her family dynamics on her confinement at her home, and the important role of the program on her social network's expansion.

<b>Second phase:</b>	
<b>Context</b>	<b>Type of record</b>
Interactional dimension	The participant talks about herself, her family (especially her couple), her experience in the social program, the institutions that the program motivates her to connect with (city hall, health care center, educational institutions, etc.), and people she has met through the program, such as the intervention agent and other women particularly relevant for her.
Temporal dimension	The participant's life history shows that before the program she only thought about her immediate preoccupations, related mainly to her home and her couple's needs (cooking, washing, cleaning, farming). However, after participating in the program, she started to think about the future and dreaming about new possibilities, for example, to study and sell her loom.
Spatial dimension	When the participant mentioned the new places she had seen and the people she was mingling with, it became apparent that the program had not only improved her productive activity but also expanded her social support network in two ways. First, in terms of the informal relations established with the intervention agent and other women, based on affection and trust. Second, in terms of the link with formal institutions such as the program itself, the city hall, etc.
Socio-cultural dimension	Three distinctive aspects are worth noticing in this case. First, that the participant belongs to an indigenous group characterized by hierarchical relationships among the members of the community, in which old people are regarded as social authorities and men as heads of the household. Second, the role of women in this community is confined to home duties and childrearing. Third, at the moment of the interview, there was a conflict between community authorities and the local government regarding land distribution and use. In this conflict, it was interesting to note the intervention of a woman from the community that also holds a political position.

Third phase: Themes	Type of record
Triangulation with participants	At the end of the study, we contacted some participants again to talk about the effects of the social program beyond productive activities, focusing on their temporal and spatial expansion. They helped us to understand the role of the social program in the process of leaving their homes and traditional duties to connect with other people and institutions, as well as their re-thinking of themselves as women worthy of having their own aspirations. On the other hand, they mentioned the burden that this shifting of roles represents for them, giving us insights into the program's scopes and limitations regarding women's wellbeing.
Triangulation with other researchers	During the study, we had weekly meetings with the research team to discuss the data production process (specially our concerns registered in the first and second phase of the ECT device). This helped not only to organize information into a meaningful whole, but also to see the particularities of each participant, as in the case of this woman.
Triangulation with the initial research questions	The data production process followed three stages of fieldwork, analysis, and review of the research questions derived from the specific objectives. Here, we added one question about the experience of temporal and spatial expansion as an additional effect of the social program; in addition, we considered the change in women's role in the community.

Table 4: ECT, an example of its application [47]

4. Discussion

This article has proposed that the phenomena studied by qualitative research should be accessed through the participants' experiences and meanings. The latter can be captured through holistic impressions and their corresponding thick descriptions. This perspective stems from the risk of mechanizing qualitative analysis and thus it seeks to foster a comprehensive analysis of phenomena, providing an in-depth approach. Therefore, it proposes studying phenomena as something directly related to particular people's experiences, paying attention to how participants make their life and their environment (*Umwelt*) meaningful. This becomes a way of approaching to the other person, carefully listening to their expression just-as-it-is, recovering its casuistic aspects in order to avoid reductionism and abstractions. In order to do so, qualitative phenomena must be understood dynamically, i.e., as permanently *ongoing*, *open-ended processes*. All this seeks to avoid the mechanization of the research process that—as has already been noted—leads to trivialization, excessive fragmentation, and over-interpretation of the participants' discourse. These certainly are just some of the risks that qualitative researchers face when conducting analyses, yet in this

article we have offered some considerations on how researchers entering this field might ensure the validity of their research. [48]

As noted along the text, in the process of capturing experience and constructing meaning, the contributions of the phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches are remarkable. These traditions are based on concrete human experiences, seeking to generate rich descriptions of them and their meaning. This stands in opposition to the epistemology associated with analytical logic that seeks to construct clear and precise representations, detached from the experience that originates them. Thus, it is possible to distinguish between methods focused on abstractive separation and methods focused on the articulation of experiences and meanings. The latter approach must be guided by the events in a person's life: life circumstances and relationships with others, both located in a specific time and space. According to these postulates, the first scientific task is descriptive—based on an intuitive understanding (*Anschauung*)—prior to any definition of concepts and categories; focused on *organismically* rooted actions, instead of isolated events. Such a perspective also leads to identifying relationships that are established between these actions and the contextual and socio-cultural aspects in which they develop (CORNEJO, 2008; VALSINER & VAN DER VEER, 2000). [49]

Future lines of work may develop at both the theoretical and practical levels. Regarding the former, we acknowledge that our proposal—though based on phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions—is partial, as it does not aim to address the entire corpus of ideas generated by these traditions. The attempt to build an integral, comprehensive system between different phenomenological and hermeneutic approaches certainly creates gaps that, for someone versed in these philosophical traditions, raise many questions; for instance, regarding the relation between subjectivity and intersubjectivity. In this study, we make an invitation to the broader audience of qualitative researchers to re-think these issues instead of generating an all-new philosophical foundation for the field, which could be a future research question. Also, the theoretical basis of this work is open to other approaches that could complement it, such as the socio-phenomenological tradition (SCHÜTZ, 1967 [1932]) or ethnomethodology (GARFINKEL, 1991 [1967]). [50]

An aspect that we believe should be considered in future research is the contribution that a multidisciplinary approach may provide to the proposed ECT analysis device. Its proposed use is understood as a disciplinary matrix (GEERTZ, 2000a [1983]) where all disciplines converge in some sort of connection with the phenomenon studied, helping to increase the phenomenon's density by way of specific descriptions. For example, the multidisciplinary study of poverty is open to a series of possible descriptions, such as how people see themselves, how they express the economic restrictions in their life projects, and the forms of interaction deployed in contexts of poverty (e.g., DAHER, 2015). The phenomenon emerges from the diversity of its descriptions; considered as a whole, they enable more appropriate approaches to the phenomenon. [51]

Finally, the introduction of the concepts of experience and meaning enables the human and social sciences to have a standard of their own—not tied to the requirements of the natural sciences (DILTHEY, 1989 [1883]). This change in focus is driven by an approach to knowledge that defines the value of evidence based on its relevance to the phenomenon rather than on its attachment to the established discipline. Qualitative researchers usually make notes or memos during the research process, regardless of the techniques employed. The ECT device seeks to organize and guide those annotations in order to capture key elements regarding the encounter with the participants, the context where data production was conducted, and the themes that emerged as relevant to people involved. This could prevent researchers from becoming "trapped" in previously established themes or in those that are important for them but not for the participants. Following the distinction between descriptive and relational analysis (KRAUSE, 1995), this proposal could contribute in the transition from the mere description of the phenomenon to a more comprehensive approach, based on themes and relations established by the participants themselves rather than as a result of the research team's intuitions or categories, and also considering the context where data production was conducted. Thus, instead of adding more production activities or making greater analytical efforts, the ECT device suggests a way to systematize and point out reflections that should be included in any research project, offering an approach to methods that avoids mechanization. Hence, the ECT device's contribution to qualitative researchers—or social scientists in general—is an analytical guide oriented exclusively towards the participants' experiences and meanings, through the *encounter* with the participants instead of the researcher's preconception of them, taking into account the *context* where that encounter takes place, observing the interactions itself and its personal and historical setting, and understanding the various *themes* of the participants as different aspects of a common—and unique—core: the participants' life. [52]

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